

11-15-2021

Sisterhood

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/depaul-magazine>



Part of the [Film Production Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(2021) "Sisterhood," *DePaul Magazine*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 412032 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/depaul-magazine/vol1/iss412032/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Alumni Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in DePaul Magazine by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.



The late Sor María Rosa Leggol, the subject of Miraflores Films' first feature, helped save thousands of Honduran children from poverty through Sociedad Amigos de los Niños, which she founded in 1966.

SISTERHOOD

A new documentary empowers women filmmakers and brings the story of a trailblazing nun to screens for the first time

By Craig Keller

In 2018, when **Jessica Sarowitz (LAS '91)** launched a media company dedicated to amplifying the voices of inspiring women through documentaries, she christened it Miraflores Films. Miraflores is a neighborhood in Tegucigalpa, the bustling capital of Honduras, a Central American nation beset by widespread violence and economic hardship. It's where the late Franciscan nun Sor (Sister) María Rosa Leggol, who is sometimes called the Mother Teresa of Honduras and is the subject of Miraflores' first film, "With This Light," seeded and grew Sociedad Amigos de los Niños (SAN), or the Friends of the Children Society. SAN has helped save more than 80,000 children from poverty through housing, education and medical programs.

For Sarowitz, a business executive, philanthropist and former DePaul Trustee, "With This Light" is a tribute kindled by a deeply personal connection. Sarowitz emigrated to the United States from Honduras as a toddler with her parents, who were philanthropists who supported SAN from Chicago. When she was 9 years old, Sarowitz met Leggol in Honduras during a family trip. "I saw Sor as this mythical nun figure who was always vibrant, full of energy, running around and giving the greatest hugs," recalls Sarowitz. "Just a joyous smile on her face."

Sarowitz's interest in telling Leggol's story is a natural extension of the philanthropic support she and her husband, Steve, have long given to myriad social justice initiatives. As a

first-generation college graduate, Sarowitz credits DePaul with helping to develop her philosophy of philanthropy.

“DePaul taught me servant leadership and the value of caring for your community,” she says. “I live in the business world, but have a responsibility to dedicate my talents and time to service. I got that from DePaul. I saw that in action then, and I see it in action today.”

UPLIFTING WOMEN AND HONDURANS

Miraflores Films aims to provide opportunities to women in film. “With This Light” is executive-produced by Sarowitz and co-directed by Laura Bermudez and Nicole Bernardi-Reis. Bermudez is a Honduran filmmaker whose credits include “Negra soy,” a short film about Garifuna women striving for better lives in Honduras. Chicago-based Bernardi-Reis, who also serves as producer, has credits that include “Radical Grace,”

a documentary about three nuns who persisted in their social justice activism after being castigated as radical feminists. Cinematographer Lisa Rinzler’s credits include “Menace II Society,” “Pollock” and “Pope Francis: A Man of His Word.” Additionally, DePaul alumni **Erin Moreland (CDM ’19)**, **Mary Kay Cook (THE ’97)** and **Anna Wasilewski (BUS ’14)** worked in production and art direction on “With This Light,” and DePaul students Brianna Smith and Caroline Walker served as interns.

Bernardi-Reis says Miraflores also worked with a feminist film collective in Honduras to staff its crew for location shoots. National representation was essential.

“It was important for us that the majority of the team be Honduran. They have a growing film industry, and we wanted to provide opportunities for some very talented people there,” she says. “They helped us make sure we’re really grounded in the authentic Honduran experience.”

SOR LEGGOL’S STORY

As an orphaned child herself, Leggol found her calling after meeting German Franciscan nuns performing missionary work

Photo courtesy of Jessica Sarowitz



Left: Jessica Sarowitz’s mother, Edith Duran, Sor María Rosa Leggol and Sarowitz in Honduras enjoy a past visit.

Bottom: Actors portraying German Franciscan nuns walk along the beach in Chicago, where the filmmakers reenacted a pivotal moment from Sor Leggol’s childhood.



Photo courtesy of Miraflores Films



Location sound mixer Carlo Jose Herrchen and assistant producer María José Arauz with co-director and producer Nicole Bernardi-Reis during a shoot in Honduras for “With This Light”

in Honduras. She took her religious vows in 1949 as a member of the Milwaukee-based Congregation of the Franciscan School Sisters of the Latin American Province.

Returning to Honduras, Leggol was assigned as a night-shift supervisor in a hospital. In her spare hours, she established homes for at-risk children, many of whose mothers were incarcerated. Leggol’s grassroots efforts attracted outside funding, and in 1966, she founded SAN, which today encompasses group homes for children, adolescents and young adults, schools and vocational training centers, and a hospital.

“She literally built a town called Nuevo Paraiso for orphaned children and struggling families from the ground up and the road to get there,” says Erin Moreland, referring to a SAN compound located in a rural area east of Tegucigalpa.

The film weaves together two timelines: one documenting Leggol’s interactions with current program beneficiaries and the other exploring pivotal moments from her past through reenactments and archival images. The filmmakers conducted interviews with Leggol during several trips to Honduras from 2019 to early 2020. They also gathered research through background interviews with three generations of SAN beneficiaries.

“We didn’t want this to just be about her past, because she was still so active and full of life,” says Bernardi-Reis. Present-day scenes include activity at a school for teen girls and young women fleeing poverty, a jubilee celebrating Leggol’s 70th year as a nun and a poignant expression of gratitude from a woman whose children, now graduating from high school, came under SAN’s care years earlier when she was unable to provide for them.

Even in her 90s, Leggol kept a rigorous schedule. The filmmakers roused themselves from bed to document her morning prayers at 2 a.m., when she began her day.

“Sor was trained under German Franciscan nuns. They had a powerful influence on her life. That’s why she got up at 2 a.m.,” says Sarowitz, laughing. “She loved to tease visitors by asking, ‘Are you going to pray with me in the morning?’ Those who

knew her were like, ‘Oh, I don’t know, Sister.’ The uninitiated would say, ‘Sure,’ thinking she meant 8 a.m. Nope. Surprise!”

“We shot her doing her everyday work,” adds Bernardi-Reis. “People would often come to her and ask for advice. We knew that any time we had with her would be a blessing. We had hoped it would be longer.”

Sadly, Leggol died on Oct. 16, 2020, at age 93, before filming completed.

“Sor got COVID maybe eight weeks before she died, and it hit her hard,” says Sarowitz haltingly, saddened by the loss of a friend and guiding light. “She’d always had some health issues and underlying conditions.”

The pandemic paused production. The U.S. crew held its last location shoot in Honduras in January 2020 and couldn’t return because of stringent lockdown measures. Plans to shoot scenes in Leggol’s hometown of Puerto Cortés were scuttled. The film industry ground to a halt as unions negotiated safety guidelines. Months passed. By November, the team determined they needed to finish the film one way or another.

They decided to shoot the remaining script, comprising backstory reenactments, in Chicago in January 2021. The team scheduled two days on location and two days at Cinespace Chicago Film Studios, where Bernardi-Reis arranged to use a production stage situated next to DePaul’s Cinespace stages.

One scene, depicting the moment when a young Leggol first met the German nuns on an Atlantic Ocean coast during a Honduran summer, was shot on Lake Michigan during the depths of a Chicago winter. “Crew members were brushing snow off actors in nun costumes, and the directors and Lisa were out there early in the morning figuring out angles that wouldn’t show any ice,” says Sarowitz.

“We want to build the capacity of those doing the work internally, being led by their ideas. Sor’s model of holistic community-building is what is needed.”

—Jessica Sarowitz (LAS ’91)

Another pivotal scene revolves around a bonfire. The moment re-creates a favorite ritual Leggol enacted to help the children move beyond the trauma that had brought them to her. “They write down some past thing they feel is holding them back on a piece of paper and throw it into the fire,” says Sarowitz. “It’s symbolic of how there’s relief from that past, and you’re ready to write the next chapter in the journey of your life.”

Were the filmmakers surprised they completed the movie despite the daunting hurdles fate threw in their path?

“No. I feel like all these challenges were just here to show us we’re doing a worthwhile project,” says Bernardi-Reis. “And Sor’s optimism has rubbed off on me after three years. You have to have faith. With this team, there’s no way we weren’t going to make a beautiful film that’s going to move people.”